WHERE THE LAUGH COMES IN.

By ALAN DALE.

The Little Supper in "Never Again."

LAUGHTER is nature's great unwinder. When the mainsprings of our daily life are so tightly wrought that we need relief from the tension, off we go to the playhouse to unwind ourselves. That is why "light entertainments" nearly always succeed in this metropolis. We clamor for an excuse to laugh, as an antidote to the drudgery of the bread-and-butter tussle. It is the butterfly notion that can best relish various issues. In New York nine out of ten are busy bees, hungry for a "night off." At the Herald Square Theatre the clever recommendation, "It is to laugh," has done as much for the musical comedy there as has any member of the cast. And we are now lured to Koster & Bial's by the picture of a horse laughing. Let us laugh. Let us laugh. That is the cry. Apres nous, la fin du monde.

"If I want to cry," says materfamilias, "all I have to do is to stay at home and look at my unpaid bills."

"If I am anxious for reflection," avers paterfamilias, "my ledger will furnish me with as much as I require."

And the question naturally arises: Where does the laugh come in? Few people know why they laugh. If they stopped to analyze their merriment its edge would be blunted. Intellectual humor is not at all in vogue. The more unthinking the laughter, the more exhilarating its effect. All the managers will tell you that. They know all about it. They speculate in it. They buy plays that are warranted to contain a laugh a minute—or they think that they do, which amounts to pretty much the same thing.

If you will carefully consider the chuckle-evolving productions in this city last week, you will easily discover the cause of our mirth. You will become quite convinced of the undoubted fact that the most pregnant source of laughter lies in the misfortunes of others. Humor is ill-natured. We revel in the sense of superiority that comes to us when we watch our fellows making fools of themselves. The trusting husband, whose wife is inconstant—with an inconstancy that is apparent to everybody but to him—makes us hold our sides and shriek. Why? Because it is so fantastic to be "on the inside track" of it all, and to detect human weakness in its absurdest form, while sitting comfortably, warmly and irresponsibly in a well-appointed playhouse.

The ancient wife with the juvenile husband, who amuses himself with pretty theatre girls, keeping up the illusion of domestic devotion in the most conscientious manner, never fails to produce the tintinnabulation of laughter. We feel so superior. We know it all. It is so gorgeous to revel in the old lady's misfortune, with its unreality as an excuse. We hug ourselves in sheer delight. We laugh our sides loose, and we are certain that it is all perfectly harmless; that it is human nature. Grotesque make-ups fill our souls with joy, generally because they vaguely suggest some friend at whom, in real life, we should deem it impolite to smile. The colossal success of May Robson as the queen of make-up artists is entirely due to her clever portrayal of the foibles of living types whom we encounter in our serious moments and treat seriously.

Yes, we can laugh at human weakness, and we can laugh at little else. It is innate. As children, we roar at the odious fate of the clown in the circus. The more he is kicked and buffeted around the more we yell. He cannot fall over chairs enough to please us. He cannot stumble into traps and awaken our compassion. Our fathers and mothers pay their money out to treat us to a series of entertaining misfortunes, and we are duly grateful. People who can't laugh at this sort of thing are voted dyspeptic, splenetic and hypochondriacs. There is something wrong with them. I will herewith confess that I have never met such people.

The humor of New York is ill-natured. All humor is ill-natured. Even Mr. Addison had his little say on that subject. "The passion of laughter," declared Addison, "is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly. Everybody laughs at somebody that is in an inferior state of folly to himself. It was formerly the custom for every great house in England to keep a tame fool dressed in petticoats, that the heir of the family might have an opportunity of joking upon him and diverting himself with his absurdities. For the same reason idiots are still in request in most of the courts of Germany, where there is not a prince of any great magnificence who has not two or three dressed, distinguished, indisputed fools in his retinue whom the rest of the courtiers are always making their jests upon."

In New York we can't keep inferior fools in our household. We need all available space for ourselves. Managers engage the fools, and allow us to wallow in their mimic infirmities for a trivial sum that we are willing and anxious to expend.

If you don't believe that we laugh at the misfortunes of others, just look around you and you will soon be convinced. At the Garrick Theatre a French farce is being performed under the title of "Never Again." Some time ago there was a popular belief that the events of the divorce court were not diverting to Americans. In fact, I have heard at least one erudite spectator remark that the sanctity of the home was the great feature of American life. He even pointed scornfully to the frivolous tone of French productions, and said that Americans had a humor of their own that steered away from marital infelicities.

Yet the principal laughter-provoking scene in "Never Again" is a chaos of illicit misadventure. A buxom young wife, married to an egotistical violoncellist, with long hair and interminable egotism, meets an old lover. The two were familiar even with pet names. He was Da-Da, and she was Zee-Zee—or something of the sort. He rents an apartment, and invites her to meet him there. You see them alone—in dual solitude. (The smile begins to dawn upon your features.) The husband, however, has rented the same apartment. He enters the parlor and sees their supper laid—they being at the back of the house. He eats the supper, the janitor standing there, frenziedly anxious to get him away. (The smile has dawned, and is merging into a laugh.) Husband is finally removed, and the guilty couple take their places at the table. They have settled down to material enjoyment of bird and bottle, when husband returns. The wife hides behind a screen. The husband, aware that he is disturbing a dual solitude, makes merry about it, and tries to peep at the lady.

"I should like to see her," he remarks.

"You wouldn't like to see her," retorts a friend. (The laughter now bubbles forth in a merry stream.) At the climax of this scene the wife falls, limp, into a chair in a dead faint. They carry her through the apartment from room to room, followed by the people interested in the episode. It is a pandemonium of luckless passion brought to bay. The old gentleman who had been renewing his acquaintance with the violoncellist's wife had a deceived spouse of his own. She also appears, irate and unduly suspicious, and the scene ends in riotous subterfuges. (The laughter has merged into a roar. The audience is convulsed.)

You laughed with the rest, of course, for laughter is just as contagious as measles, as friends of managers are aware when they pay to start it. In reality you have been immensely amused at a young wife who is supping with somebody else's husband, in a silent apartment; at an old husband who believes that his legitimate spouse is dumb, and who is amusing himself with a souvenir of his earlier Lothario days; and—principally—at the hideous old woman who has been playing "dumb," and who suddenly appears to confront her antique spouse. What compelled your intensest mirth, however, was the delusion of the old violoncellist.

"The husband must be an old fool," he cries ecstatically, and as you know that he himself is the old fool, you shriek. It is so inordinately funny—so absolutely irresistible. You laugh all the more because you know that in real life you would pretend hypocritically to be sorry for these four sexual offenders—sorry for, or angry with, them. Of the buxom wife you would say, smoothly, "She is a wretch, and we'll cut her dead the next time we meet her." Of the old husband you would remark, "There is no beast like an old beast. He is simply sickening." Of the ancient wife you would observe, "Poor old soul! My heart bleeds for her. It is just another case of man's perfidy." And of the violoncellist you would opine that he deserved his fate for being such an egotistical ass.

There is nothing in the world so funny as tragedy. Tragedy is the spice of life—on the stage. If "Never Again" succeeds, it will be certainly due to the fact that the audience is permitted to view as comedy that which, to the people on the stage, is tragedy. Try and understand that. It isn't a bit subtle. In fact, this whole question never even grazes the possibility of subtlety. New York humor is not as dissimilar from Paris humor as we are inclined to believe. This is a progressive community, and if progress continues, any French play will find a place on the American stage without the intervention of the expurging moralist. The types in "Never Again" fill us with a sense of our own superiority. Ha! Ha! we wouldn't be in that husband's boots. He! He! we'd like to see a woman making such a fool of us! Ho! Ho! Picture a modern man as blind as that inane violoncellist.

In "The Girl from Paris" there is one scene that never fails to convulse the audience. A husband, described in the programme as "a shining light," disguises himself in a kilt and appears at "the Spa Hotel, Schoffenburgen." His wife turns up at the same resort, and does not recognize him. While he is partaking of a meal at a table he is forced to the wooing of his lady by some other fellow. In his agony he bolts his food, throws food unconsciously down his throat, and simulates the sensations of the outraged husband in various ways. The audience simply howls. There he sits—the fool—absurd in a Highlander costume, while under his very nose his legitimate spouse is playing him false.

This situation appeals to the audience as delightfully pungent. It is human nature shown up in all its insecurity and riskiness. The saucy old husband becomes a veritable buffoon, dripping with fun, and there is a sort of malicious joy in the spectacle of the unconscious wife gulled by a kilt. You would look askant at the man who said to you, "I cannot laugh at this." You would say to him, "Take some pills, dear boy. You have a liver," and you would feel genuinely apprehensive of his health. Yet the husband in this "Girl from Paris" case is really nothing more than Addison's "tame fool dressed in petticoats," and you laugh at him because you believe him to be distinctly inferior in every way to yourself. If this isn't ill-natured, what is? The situation would lose all its humor if the husband instantly realized the significance of his position. You wouldn't laugh at all. It would fall as flat as a pancake. To please us this husband must be mentally infirm and conspicuously in difficulties.

May Irwin, the rotund humorist, knows more of human nature than any ten playwrights who dish up human foibles appetizingly for us. Miss Irwin, in her knowledge of our ill-nature, gets ahead of us with surprising effect. Before we have time to laugh at her she laughs at herself. And that simply rivets our admiration. We love May Irwin. We are grateful to her. We think she is the funniest creature on earth, because, just to amuse us, she makes a butt of herself. It is very ordinary for one person to make a butt of another on the stage—in fact, it is the old idea of the clown of the circus—but it is vastly unusual for a comedienne to do what May Irwin does, and the imitators are cropping up.

"A cigarette firm want to use my pictures in their cigarettes," says May Irwin. "They must contemplate enlarging their packages."

"Here's a note from my manager," she remarks, confidingly. "He wants me to

"I Have Trouble Enough as It Is."—The Hoppers in "El Capitan."

tate to say that May Irwin's immense vogue is due entirely to her marvellous understanding of human nature. She is perfectly aware of the fact that if she posed as a sylph and stood in the centre of the stage and warbled, "Oh, love! I love you. My love!" in the usual stellar manner she would awaken nothing but our derision.

Miss Irwin emulates the example of Falstaff, who is funny merely because he makes a guy of himself before other people do it for him. "Men of all sorts," says Falstaff, "take a pride to gird at me. The brain of man is not able to invent anything that tends to laughter more than I invent, or is invented on me. I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men."

In "The Widow Jones" May Irwin first won our approval by this remark: "The advantage of having a big mouth is that you can kiss and talk at the same time." The audience was aghast at her daring; then they warmed into admiration of it.

"She knows her imperfections," they said. "She has a very large mouth. It is very ugly. We cannot recall any that is uglier. How strange of her to tell us what we know! How clever! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

And clever May Irwin's tactics undoubtedly are—clever, tinged with a streak of genius. Dickens knew no more of human nature than does May Irwin. The beauty of it all is that while we think we are laughing at her expense, she is really laughing at ours.

The success of "My Friend from India" is due to the mirror scene, which is a new phase of our ill-nature served up unconventionally. A comedian dressed as a woman gets behind a glass to hide. Immediately afterward enters a real woman, attired identically. She takes the trouble to explain that she cannot see very well without her spectacles, and thus, mistaking the glass for a looking glass, imagines that she sees her own reflection therein. The comedian behind the glass imitates all her ridiculous, perky, affected and peacockian motions, and you burst into laughter at his ingenuity, and at the sight of a frivolous woman making such a fool of herself. There is more genuine humor in this situation than in the others I have described. But ill-nature is at the back of it. The laughter is caused by the woman's deception, and by the picture of her antics as shown by the comedian, who is playing behind the looking glass.

I enjoyed a capital performance of "El Capitan" at the Broadway Theatre last week. This comic opera was excellent when it was first seen here. It has even been improved, however. De Wolf Hopper is in persistent "rapport" with his audience, and his knowledge of what pleases New Yorkers is second only to that owned by May Irwin. Of course, the constant appearance of this elongated gentleman by the side of his dainty, piquant little wife, Edna Wallace, is itself a fruitful source of laughter.

The night I saw "El Capitan" was a very enthusiastic occasion. "The Typical Scenes of Zanzibar" was encored about fifteen times. For one of the encores Hopper appeared with a realistic struggle for the centre of the stage. "They want me," cried Edna. "Can't you see that they want me?"

Hopper turned to the audience with a very disconsolate expression on his face—just the sort of disconsolateness that New Yorkers love to see. "For goodness' sake," he cried, pathetically, "don't encourage her, I have trouble enough as it is."

The audience responded with a guffaw that shook the chandelier. Hopper was bringing himself voluntarily into their ill-natured intelligibility. He was "making fun" of his marital position. He was holding himself up for derision as a hen-pecked husband. He was setting forth little Edna Wallace as an exacting wife, who made things lively for him off the stage. Every man in the audience cheered his utterance as something overweeningly confidential and pleasant. The women chuckled with delight at the picture framed for their express edification.

Comedians can only succeed in New York when they thoroughly understand the not very mysterious ramifications of our nature. Playwrights will only make a hit as laugh-evolvers when they have learned the secret of our humor-point. And that secret is an intense edification at the discomfiture of our neighbors and a yearning desire that our comedians and comediennes shall show themselves in situations that render them distinctly inferior to ourselves.

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"Managers Buy Plays Warranted to Contain a Laugh a Minute, or Think They Do."